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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was exploration of the role shift from participant to observer in educational research and evaluation. Examples and counter-examples of graduate students who were experiencing the role shift were explored. Generalizations were made in order to abstract the data, and draw the conclusion that ethnographic approaches facilitate objectivity and an increased sensitivity and awareness to one's environment and one's role in that environment. These are areas where, by definition, every educator might seek "to grow and improve." To have a more complete sense of what it means to be a learner or teacher, all educational participants should be encouraged to inquire into their own lives. One thinks of teaching pupils as well as their teachers to be field workers in their own settings and thereby bringing a different instructional dimension with a participant problem solving stance to educational events that have so far eluded curriculum reformers and other attempts at large-scale educational improvement. (Author/KM)

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Role Shifts and Role Strains Entailed in Moving from Participant to Observer

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A paper presented as part of a symposium "Doing Ethnographies of Schooling: Are Practitioners Allowed?" at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Education Research Association, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 14, 1981.

This paper makes a small attempt toward the conceptualization of the progression, entailed in moving from participant to observer, given a limited population of various kinds of educational insiders seeking to become educational ethnographers. This effort is undertaken more to elicit responses, examples and counter-examples, than because of any sense of initial closure with the role progression. Along with Hughes, this paper proposes that

> We have an obligation to catch the social points of sensitivity in our students and the people whom we study. Having found it we should expand it, and make it more abstract so that it can be used as a scientific instrument...I think it is clear that most of us believe that on principle anyone can study anyone else and that anyone has a right to protect himself against the efforts which come from giving up information (1974:331)

It is both in the spirit of democratization of knowledge and as an aid to its abstraction and consequent scientific communicability that we offer a highly tentative and data grounded participant to observer continuum in contrast to the frequently discussed observer to participant progression (Ruchkin, 1981). It may be useful to recall a recent delineation of the observer to participant progression as background to the role shift concerns to be addressed here. Drawing on a dimension of the Kimball and Partridge (1979) conceptualization, which is an extension and expansion of the well known observer to participant sequence (Gold, 1958, Junker, 1960, Schatzman and Strauss, 1973) the researcher starts with separation from "home territory" and proceeds to the equidistant roles of visitor, guest, explorer and participant

observer and the somewhat more remote stages of participant operator, researcher-evaluator and departure from the field to re-entry and professional incorporation. Clearly, the progression that begins with participant is not simply a reversing of the stages or processes of the above continuum. Quite tentatively and for purposes of sorting some role strain concerns we posit the following, incomplete progression:

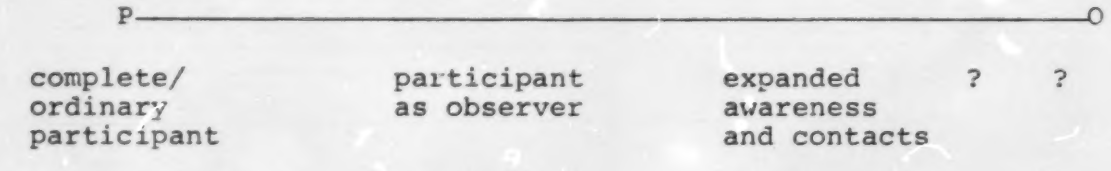

Figure 1

This sequence suggests that, after assuming the role of a participant as observer in a "home" setting, the researcher moves to a stage of expanded awareness and contacts. This stage is congruent with the explorer stage offered in the Kimball and Partridge concept of the participant to observer progression. The continuum skips the visitor, guest and explorer stages of their model. The more remote stages along this sequence as well as possible intermediate steps between the suggested roles remain to be identified.

This tentative model of role shifts and the examples of related role strains are based on data drawn from unpublished studies undertaken in a graduate course in field methods supplemented by some published ethnographic studies of educational settings. The diversity in the backgrounds, research settings and roles of the researchers from the field methods course is illustrated by Figure 2. Although all the researchers were graduate students in

STUDY	BACKGROUND	SETTING/FOCUS	ROLE/FAMILIARITY	TECHNIQUES	ROLE SHIFTS
A	Resource teacher in math and gifted program, secondary schools. Part time graduate study: Math Ed.	Two senior high schools. Focus: Students' and teachers' perceptions of a program.	A resource teacher in the schools. Familiar with program and staff.	Interviews with students. Interviews with teachers.	Participant → Observer
B	Special Education Resource Teacher in secondary school. Part time graduate study: Reading	Staff meetings at center for LD students. Focus: staff members.	Already regular member of the group.	Participant observation Semantic Differential.	Participant → Observer
C	11 years secondary teacher of ESOL. Part time graduate study: English Ed., ESOL	Senior High School classes, corridors, lunch room, grounds. Focus: ESOL students	Teacher/Observer own school. Had been ESOL student once.	Participant observation. Interviews with students.	Participant → Observer
D	Curriculum Full time graduate study: Curriculum	Preschool classroom. Focus: Interactions among students.	Volunteer, own child in this school.	Participant observation. Interviews with students. Interviews with teachers.	Participant → Observer
E	7 year classroom and reading, junior high. Resource teacher. Part time graduate study: Reading	Classrooms in 2 junior high schools. Focus: Student-teacher interaction.	2 years as resource to these schools. Observer in some classes, resource in others.	Participant observation. Interviews with students.	Participant → Observer

STUDY	BACKGROUND	SETTING/FOCUS	ROLE/FAMILIARITY	TECHNIQUES	ROLE SHIFTS
F	7 years secondary and graduate teacher of Journalism. Part time graduate study: English Ed.	Graduate seminar in journalism. Focus: Teacher-student interaction.	Observer of new professor, students. Participant in School of Journalism.	Participant observation. Interviews with students.	Observer → Participant
G	Elementary school teacher. Community College math teacher. Part time graduate study: Math Ed.	Community College Career Workshop. Focus: Adults returning to college.	Knew some subjects	Participant observation. Career workshop. Interviews.	Observer → Participant
H	Math instructor on campus. Full time graduate study: Math Ed.	Room on campus where math tutors work with tutees. Focus: College math tutors and tutees.	Observer: Knew some of the subjects.	Participant observation. Interviews with tutors. Interviews with tutees.	Observer → Participant
I	Math teacher, secondary school and on campus. Full time graduate study: Math Ed.	Montessori preschool classroom. Focus: Student-Teacher interaction.	Observer in class, parent-own son in school. No experience teaching preschool or Montessori.	Participant observation. Interviews with students. Interviews with teachers.	Observer → Participant
J	Junior and senior high school English teacher. Masters in School Administration. Full time graduate study: Administration	Elementary school. Focus: Faculty and faculty-administration communication.	Observer in unfamiliar school, classrooms, teachers' lounge, meetings.	Participant observation. Document Analysis: Principal's daily written announcements.	Observer → Participant

STUDY	BACKGROUND	SETTING/FOCUS	ROLE/FAMILIARITY	TECHNIQUES	ROLE SHIFTS
K	Nun. Elementary teacher, principal, teaching on campus in Math Ed. Full time graduate study: Math Ed.	Parochial elementary school classroom. Focus: Teacher's activities.	Observer. New school, familiar type of school and class.	Participant observation	Observer
L	English teacher, secondary school. Part time graduate study: Curriculum	Variety of setting. Focus: Itinerate teachers.	No experience in itinerate role.	Interviews with teachers.	Observer
M	Brief period as secondary special education teacher. Full time graduate study: Reading	One 6th grade classroom. Focus: Students	New school and setting. Helped students with some work. Mainly observer in room.	Participant observation. Interviews with students.	Observer → Participant

Figure 2

education their own teaching experiences ranged from elementary to graduate level. Their roles in the different research settings varied greatly with only five of the thirteen studies demonstrating a participant to observer progression.

The majority of the researchers from the field methods class did not conduct their studies in actual settings in which they were already participants, although they were members of the professional subculture. Their educational backgrounds helped them gain admittance to their settings and facilitated their comprehension of the observed activities and responses of subjects. However, these researchers started as observers and do not really fit the continuum of participant to observer that is being proposed. In addition, there were fewer statements of role strain from these researchers although all the members of the class had been requested to write their reflections on their roles as field researchers.

These researchers who started as outsiders often expressed ease in moving from the observer end of the continuum toward the participant role and indicated satisfaction in their observer role.

> *G - In the workshops I started out detached and as an observer, but ended up as a participant with not much detachment. I started out as an outsider and by the time the second life line was discussed I was accepted as another "student" in the class.
>
> *I - The most enjoyable aspect was moving from the observer end of the continuum

towards the participant end, especially getting to know the children.

*K - The most enjoyable aspect of this field work was having the opportunity to observe a class without internal responsibility, that is, not being responsible for either the teacher's behavior or that of the students.

The problems and strains that this group of researchers mainly tended to identify were related to the analysis of their data which involved categorizing, organizing and simply realizing the limitations of their information.

*M - Longer and more consistent periods of time would be spent in participating with and observing these students.

*I - The most painful aspects of field work were conversing with the data to develop categories which melded into a cohesive presentation and the constant struggle in finding a balance between telling everything and just providing sufficient information to substantiate what the data were saying.

*L - In the course of this study I have come to understand the necessity to verify interview data with observational data.

These researchers who "went afield" in their field of education demonstrated movement along the more conventional progression of the observer to participant continuum and little difficulty in assuming their roles.

In contrast, the researchers who conducted studies in settings in which they were insiders expressed more role strain in moving along a different progression. As these researchers moved from being complete, ordinary participants to being participant observers they experienced conflicts within themselves and with others. The

conflicts with self involved bias and also dual processing of data.

> *B - As a participant, however, I was initially faced with the task of redirecting my role toward observational responses. It was very difficult to be objective as I watched the interaction of the group. In fact, a major disadvantage that I found during the course of this study was the fact that I often needed to pay attention to the information and data from the meeting in order to do my work effectively.
>
> *F - As I review my experience as a field worker I believe that most of my difficulties originated in conflicts between myself and my roles.
>
> *C - I was finding it more difficult to maintain objectivity and that my affection for them was conflicting with my role as observer-participant. I found it extremely painful to be objective ... I observed a lack of understanding and naivete from some of my colleagues concerning foreign students and I felt helpless in regard to the institutional insensitivity, to the special educational needs of these students.
>
> *D - The educational "Me" constantly evaluated the setting in terms of my own educational philosophy and beliefs about education in general and very young children in particular.

In one of the few personal reflections found in published ethnographies of educational settings McPherson (1972) offers additional evidence of the role strain in moving from participant to observer:

> I did this infrequently because I found that my own identification with my job tended to take precedence over my new role of observer. Detachment came afterward, away from the situation, when I realized how my own absorbtion in being a teacher had made me forget to listen, made me neglect to involve myself in potentially significant conversations (5).

One possible technique for coping with the strains of dual roles is to keep a separate journal of personal reactions to observations. This does not eliminate bias or the need for dual processing but it does help separate the data that the person as an educator perceives and analyzes from the data that the person as an ethnographer observes and categorizes. It allows the researchers to affirm rather than deny their experiences and values as educators while trying to preserve their objectivity as ethnographers. Some of the unpublished studies included personal journals.

> *D - My problem wasn't going native; I was already there. I had to disengage from my insider's empathy with the concerns and goals of this very intimate school and step back to see what was going on. Constant reflection and questioning of my motives in observer's comments and reflections from the field helped me to be aware of this dilemma and its possible influence on my observations.
>
> *F - My "journal" notes were an effort to separate my theories from my observations as well as to monitor my roles.

Relations with colleagues were a source of role strain for some researchers moving from participant to participant as observer

roles. There was evidence of suspicion on the part of fellow educators as they perceived the educator assuming a role other than that of a familiar member of the peer group, a role that may not have been clearly understood. Educators conducting ethnographic research may face an alteration in relationships with others in a familiar setting. The social support as well as the information extended may be affected by taking on the extra study role. An additional source of tension was the researchers' own concern with the confidentiality of information about peers.

> *C - Much to my surprise, my colleagues posed the first problems. When I approached them about my project, they seemed rather skeptical and even suspicious of my motives.
>
> *D - Although I carefully explained the kind of research I was doing to all adults in this setting, I never knew whether they understood that what they told me as friends and confidants could, in my new role of an ethnographic researcher, become part of my field notes and final paper. I wonder whether researchers who begin field-work as insiders would be wise to follow Harry Wolcott's advice and always carry a notebook and pencil.

McPherson (1972) also mentions wrestling with ethical problems which were increased in her situation by the covert nature of her observer role.

> How, now that the note cards have been melted down, first into a dissertation and then into a book, can I avoid the ethical implications of my spying? (p. 4).

Unlike the researchers' peers and fellow educators, students seemed to elicit more positive reactions in the researchers. The students themselves viewed the researchers as having a variety of

roles, sometimes misperceived, including that of a "mommy", an evaluator of the program, a student teacher, a visitor and another fellow student. In C's study, which looked at students' inculturation, the students acted as key informants to the researcher. They communicated eagerly with this teacher and introduced her to other subjects for her study. In general, the researchers felt comfortable with their roles among the students.

> *C - After they (students) accepted my role as a student from the unversity and a "foreign student myself", I was able to move (along) the P-O continuum between passive presence and observer participant depending on the situation.
>
> *E - My encounters with the students were the easiest and most enjoyable aspect of my field experience.

As a researcher moves along the participant to observer continuum the problems of dual roles and objectivity remain to some degree. However, there is evidence that researchers progress to a stage of expanded awareness and contacts which offers some satisfaction to researchers not only as researchers but also as educators. Gertrude McPherson (1972) established contact with teachers in her school who would have remained more remote if she had not made the effort to observe and talk with them as part of her study. Among the unpublished ethnographic studies there were also instances of expanded awareness and contacts. C took a much closer look at a specific student population in her school and became more aware of the needs of those students and the attitudes of teachers to those students. She became much more involved with

foreign students outside of her classroom. She related to the students not only as a teacher but also as an interested adult and a person who herself once had been a foreign student. In addition, she designed and set up a course that expanded the program for foreign students.

E observed in classrooms that she would otherwise not have visited. She would not have taken the opportunity to talk socially with students in a variety of settings if it had not been for her research. D looked more closely at preschool children and their social interactions.

> *E - I do feel that my knowledge of the schools and teaching here has been expanded through my observation.
>
> *D - I grew as a result of the time I spent observing and analyzing this class and clarified my own beliefs about process- versus cognitively-oriented pre-school education.

In conclusion it seems that the progression from participant toward observer raises some intriguing questions. Although these studies represent a small sampling they demonstrate a wide diversity in roles and in role shifts. There is support for the role shift proposed in Figure 1 of this paper. There is evidence of role strain as researchers cope with the boundaries of shifting roles. Additional ethnographic studies by educators in educational settings and continued analyses of such research may produce a more definitive model of the role shifts of the researchers.

As educators attempt to use ethnographic methods in educational settings, the component of personal reflections on one's role as a researcher would facilitate the further definition and specification of a participant to observer continuum.

In spite of the problems involved in educators assuming new roles as ethnographers there are personal and professional rewards resulting from going through the process of training in ethnographic techniques. Ethnographic approaches facilitate objectivity and an increased sensitivity and awareness to one's environment and one's role in that environment. These are areas where by definition, every educator might seek "to grow and improve."

To be more fully human shall we study others or ourselves? To have a more complete sense of what it means to be a learner or a teacher, or a related individual to eitner of the aforementioned, shall we have only outsiders with appropriate distance, "objectivity" and lack of direct involvement examine our world or shall all educational participants be encouraged to inquire into their own lives? One thinks of teaching pupils as well as their teachers to be field workers in their own settings and thereby bringing a different instructional dimension with a participant problem solving stance to educational events that have so far eluded curriculum reformers and other attempts at large-scale educational improvement. And, if the field worker as "researcher is a learner, has patience, is tolerant and sympathetic, he wonders first and judges last; he appears to be that way and is that way" (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973: 65), what life-long learner, or teacher, would want to be otherwise?

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